

A Book Review of  
Marsden, *The Soul of the American University*

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### **Summary**

The influence and place of religion within the state university has been on a sharp decline over the years. George Marsden takes readers on this historical tour in his work *The Soul of the American University*. After a three-part prologue concerning major figures at Yale which lays the groundwork for his survey, Marsden's tour officially begins with overviewing the first major step in which state universities sold their religious souls through the establishment of Protestant nonsectarianism. Special emphasis on Harvard and Yale are presented, although other early American colleges and movements (particularly those within both the Presbyterian and “New Light” movements) are also discussed. Marsden specifically focuses on the role that Thomas Jefferson played in early American state colleges and universities. Just as Jefferson was opposed to a sectarian state church, his opposition to state church sectarianism continued into state colleges and universities, pushing for nonsectarian and even secular state colleges and universities. During this time, many early American colleges and universities (including Harvard and Yale) still included theological training (although some schools began to take a step away toward generic “divinity” training), and even when the literary classics, liberal arts, and sciences were taught in state colleges and universities, for the most part they were still presented from a Christian or at a minimum God-fearing perspective.

The heart of Marsden’s tour is his second part which defines the American university in a scientific age. While state colleges and universities were still predominantly led by clergy during this age, and while there was still a role of religion in colleges and universities such as mandatory or at least encouraged chapel services, a pivot away from Christianity and religion’s essential role began to ramp up as the age progressed on. Colleges and universities began to shift away from a focus on training clergy to a broader range of secular career training. Theology as a dominant study began to wane as the scientific revolution and Enlightenment began to influence colleges

and universities, especially as Germanic and European university influence made its way across the pond. Agricultural schools which eventually morphed into new state universities began to crop up across the country due to land grant laws. The fruits of Jefferson's seeds to sow secular state universities had begun to blossom. Theology as a "king of the sciences" was being pushed off its throne. Key figures during this time include Wayland and Tappan (especially Tappan's integration of German university influence in secularizing American colleges and universities), Porter's role at leading Yale on this transition, Hall's role at Johns Hopkins, Dewey's overall influence on public education, and the roles of Wilson as educator during this age and Rockefeller as a financier of public higher education. Some pushback occurred during this transitional time, especially with Princeton holding to traditional Christianity and Harper's role in Chicago. Marsden continues the trajectory of how higher education continued to take steps away from a Christian-centered and religion-centered perspective to a more secular perspective, while still holding onto a few last grips of religion and Christianity.

Marsden's final part of the tour is when he discusses the tie that no longer binds, or when Christianity and religion finally gave away to fully secular state colleges and universities of established nonbelief in religion. Colleges and universities began to focus more on vocational training and establishing various vocational schools with little room, desire, or need for the training of clergy. Darwinism and evolutionism took full root in colleges and universities beginning through some back doors by the embracing of theistic evolutionism by some Christian leaders. Religion and Christianity no longer was viewed as the lens by which students could embrace and study the sciences but was viewed at odds with science and superfluous to academic studies, according to Marsden. As in the previous periods, there was some pushback to such secularism through Catholic-led colleges and universities and the Fundamentalist movement, in which Marsden believes the Fundamentalist movement caused more long-term issues that actually solved any of the current issues (Marsden especially covers the Scopes trial and the public's response to it). Vanderbilt and other Methodist colleges and universities that quickly became predominantly secular is one major focus of his section in which Marsden shows how

quickly some colleges and universities made such a transition. Marsden also discusses the role of the American Association of University Professors in higher education, as well as the initial push for academic freedom in higher education which later led to an about-face for the pushing of the limitations of academic freedom during World War II. The relationship between Jews and Christians rounds out his discussion of the role of religious pluralism in American colleges and universities. He concludes with summarizing the key points of his work.

### Evaluation

Marsden's work is a timely must-read for every educator or future educator of higher education, particularly Christian higher educators. It is also a must-read for anyone who wishes to be involved in higher education or Christian higher education as a non-educator (such as a higher education board member). Marsden lays out a solid historical tour of how, when, and where major American colleges and universities (Harvard, Yale, etc.) lost their "soul." He clearly outlines each step these institutions of higher education took over the years to go from mainline Christian and religious higher educational institutions which focused on training clergy to nonsectarian, secular higher educational institutions which promoted nonbelief in God and tossed Christianity, religion, and theological education to the wayside.

While Marsden's history is extensive and useful for doctoral-level students preparing to teach in higher education or for current educators (as well as those involved in higher education in a non-educator role), the work is an intensive read overall. Marsden's smaller work, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*, is a good starter read for those wishing to wade into Marsden before immersing themselves in his larger work. Additionally, some of his discussions (such as on Darwinism and evolutionism in general) could have possibly been introduced earlier in the work, with the fleshing out of the discussion where he placed these discussions. His discussion on Fundamentalism as applied to higher education was a good survey, although he unpacks the overall discussion on Fundamentalism in general further in his work *Fundamentalism and American Culture*.

Marden's work needs a followup work or at least a followup discussion within Christian higher education. Where does Christian higher education go from here? Have these colleges and universities in America forever lost their "soul," or is there any hope at a restoration of the "soul" of the American university? What role should Christian educators play in secular higher education (and secular education in general)? Should Christian educators attempt to bring light and the "soul" back into the secular American university, or has Christian higher education been redirected solely to Christian higher educational institutions such as Bible colleges, seminaries, and Christian universities? Marsden argues that there is still hope for Christian higher education within secular colleges and universities. He makes the case that there is and should be room for Christian and religious educators within modern secular colleges and universities. He especially affirms the need for the room for traditional religious viewpoints.

If Marsden's thesis holds value that there is still room within the American college and university for traditional religious viewpoints, then such a view expands the Christian higher educator's vocational field. No longer is the Christian higher educator limited to retreating behind or remaining solely within the Bible college, seminary, or Christian university for teaching, but there is a "mission field" available for the Christian higher educator to serve in secular colleges and universities. How secular colleges and universities welcome or embrace Christian higher educators remains to be seen, however. Yet Marsden offers a glimmer of hope by making a solid, historical argument for the role of Christian higher educators within the college and university, especially within American higher education.

Marsden presents Christian higher educators with a valuable history as to how the modern American college and university shifted to the secular emphasis it has now embraced and asks the questions Christian higher educators have asked, specifically how and when these institutions of higher education lost their way and "soul". It is essential reading on any Christian higher educator or potential Christian higher educator's bookshelf. Now that Christian higher education has been given a historical sketch of what happened to American colleges and universities, it is time to move the discussion further into how some of the "soul" of the American university can be

restored by Christian higher educators who affirm traditional religious viewpoints bringing some of the light and “soul” back into the American university. Whether that remains to occur, only history will tell. It would be refreshing to read a future sequel to *The Soul of the American University* in which Marsden or another author presents a history of even a partial return of the American university’s “soul” due to the influence of Christian higher educators within the American university.